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ARGENTINA: Labor Unrest

Argentine labor's restiveness over what it considers inadequate pay raises is growing. Workers at several auto plants are defying the junta's ban on strikes by staging work slowdowns and stoppages to back demands for increases beyond the 12-percent general hike granted last week.

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This is the first instance of large-scale protest activity by workers since the military government took over in March. Until the coup, organized labor was the most influential civilian group, and it remains a formidable potential opponent of junta policies. The government's austerity policies may yet lead to serious unrest.

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The junta has responded by toughening the penalties not only for striking but also for lockouts by management. Some employers have apparently used this means to goad workers to strike. One local journal suggests that management would actually benefit from giving in to labor's demands, since higher wages would increase sales, head off further strikes, and justify additional price increases.

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The left is also attempting to increase tensions. The Montoneros have claimed credit for killing a supervisor in an auto plant near Buenos Aires. The murder followed the firing of more than 100 workers branded as agitators.

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The two wage increases granted by the junta since its take-over have fallen far short of offsetting the cost-of-living rise since then. Real wages have declined nearly 40 percent. The modest size of the authorized increases is in keeping with the junta's efforts to curb inflation.

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